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SUBJECT: EAP/MLS DIRECTOR RAPSON'S CONSULTATIONS ON
SOUTHEAST ASIA

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Visiting EAP/MLS Director Robert Rapson on March 9 met with ROK officials to exchange views and discuss USG objectives on Mainland Southeast Asia, particularly Burma and DPRK refugees. ROK officials conveyed general support for greater political freedoms and participation in Burma, but noted that China, India and ASEAN had key roles to play in bringing about the reforms sought. On DPRK refugees, MOFAT interlocutors described a more formal relationship with Thailand, one with standard-operating procedures, which compared to an "informal" and sensitive relationship with Cambodia. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) EAP/MLS Director Robert Rapson visited Seoul March 9-11, meeting separately with Cho Baek-san, Deputy Director-General for Asian and Pacific Affairs in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT); Ju Joong-chul, Director of MOFAT's Southeast Asia Division; Yu Joon-ha, Director of MOFAT's Inter-Korean Policy Division; and Lee Ju-heum, Chancellor of MOFAT's Institute of Foreign Affairs and National Security, and former ROK Ambassador to Burma (2005-2006).

BURMA

¶3. (C) Providing an overview of U.S. objectives toward Burma, Rapson noted that the USG was disappointed by the January 12 veto by China and Russia of the UN Security Council resolution on Burma. Still, the veto and recent events offered an opportunity to engage with China, ASEAN and others in the region to press Burma on reforms, especially to broaden participation in its current National Convention process. Despite its veto of the Security Council resolution, China issued constructive comments in its explanatory statements, including criticism of the Burmese leadership and its policies. The key now, Rapson stressed, was not to let the Burmese regime perceive the veto as a victory and a mandate to accelerate the current sham national convention process. Post-veto, the USG was engaging with China and key members of ASEAN to find a way forward on Burma. Rapson noted that if the regime took some genuine steps to broaden political participation, then the international community, including the United States, would

be in a position to possibly respond with positive steps of its own. Without political reforms, Burma would continue to pose a threat to regional stability, especially in terms of HIV/AIDS, Avian Influenza, narcotics and refugee flows. Rapson suggested that international donors to Burma, including the ROKG, should make efforts to avoid providing assistance that directly benefits the regime.

14. (C) DDG Cho said that the ROKG shared the objective of pressing Burma, adding that Seoul, privately, supported USG efforts to hold a special session of the Human Rights Council to discuss Burma. Former ROK President Kim Dae-jung, who had a special interest in human rights, had sought to visit Burma and support Aung San Suu Kyi, but Burmese officials denied his request. Cho agreed that assistance projects in Burma should not encourage the regime and insisted that the ROKG was careful about its humanitarian projects. It was important to get China and India to play a bigger role on Burma, he said. He relayed his understanding that China in February sent State Council Tang Jiaxuan to Burma to discreetly press Burma to reform. Indian actions, however, were not commensurate with India's diplomatic status, he said. Now that India was a member of the East Asia Summit (EAS), the international community might mobilize EAS to press Burma. Other venues could include the Asia Cooperation Dialogue, which Seoul was hosting in June, APEC in September and ASEAN Plus Three in November. The ROKG was willing to do what it could to provide a good example to Burma of how a country could promote both economic and political modernization.

15. (C) In a separate meeting, Southeast Asia Division Director Ju Joong-chul stressed that the ROK had not imposed economic sanctions on Burma, but Seoul had pursued a cautious approach on aid and investment. The ROKG had only given USD

14 million in grant aid over the past 15 years, and the USD 85 million in tied loans were focused on the humanitarian sector. Ju acknowledged that the Korean Electricity and Power Corporation (KEPCO) had wanted to give tied loans to improve electricity, but the ROKG had expressed reservations.

16. (C) IFANS Chancellor Lee Ju-heum spoke to his experience as ROK Ambassador to Burma (2005-2006), saying that the only way to get things done was to work with the number one or number two official in the country. It was probably unrealistic to expect international pressure, such as demanding the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, to get results. Turning to the arms scandal involving Daewoo International late last year, Lee said that Daewoo was caught selling strategic materials and artillery-production equipment to Burma thanks to a whistle-blower who contacted the ROK intelligence services. Lee speculated that Daewoo's involvement in the arms trade with Burma probably went back to when Kim Woo-choong was running Daewoo in the late 1990s.

VIETNAM

17. (C) DDG Cho said that 2007 marked the 15th anniversary of South Korea and Vietnam diplomatic relations, and Vietnam General Secretary Nong Duc Manh was expected to visit Seoul in 2007. Vietnam was the largest destination for ROK overseas investment in SEA, and currently there were no major bilateral problems. The ROK was once worried about history issues concerning the ROK's role in the Vietnam War, but leaders in Hanoi insisted on the need to focus on a future-oriented relationship, he said.

THAILAND

18. (C) Director Ju noted that the ROK had made no official comment on the 2006 coup in Thailand. Still, Seoul approached relations with the current government with caution. The ROKG had declined a request for a visit by

General Sonti Boonyaratglin over concern that a visit would seem to recognize the coup in Thailand.

NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES

¶9. (C) In conversations with MOFAT interlocutors, Rapson noted that since the passage of the 2004 North Korean Human Right Act, the USG has sought to admit eligible North Korean refugees to the United States and was appreciative of ROKG cooperation. He reiterated that the USG did not solicit refugees, but once approached the USG had a responsibility to seek to process their cases, if host governments allowed. The USG understood that the ROKG had a unique relationship with the Government of Cambodia and that DPRK refugees was a sensitive topic for both the ROKG and GOC. Still, the USG would seek continued ROKG cooperation in Cambodia, as appropriate, and elsewhere, to fulfill our requirements under the Act.

¶10. (C) DDG Cho said that Cambodia and the ROK had an "informal" relationship on DPRK refugees. Phnom Penh might be averse to diversifying this channel. The current situation involving three North Koreans seeking USG resettlement from Cambodia probably arose because the ROKG had limited facilities there to process North Koreans, plus the ROKG wanted to keep the program quiet to avoid a situation like in Vietnam in 2004 when publicity involving a large airlift of refugees to South Korea had essentially ended the program. Conditions in ROK shelters in Cambodia were crowded and logistical support was insufficient, especially in more remote areas of Cambodia. The three North Korean refugees might have heard rumors, possible from NGOs, that USG resettlement might be a better option. Asked if he thought more North Korean refugees might approach the USG in Cambodia, Cho said that it depended on the feedback that other North Koreans heard on cases in Cambodia or on those resettled to the United States. If word spread of their

difficulties, this might reduce the demand for USG resettlement.

¶11. (C) In a separate meeting, Inter-Korean Policy Division Director Yu Joon-ha said that unlike Cambodia, the ROKG had a good relationship with Thailand concerning DPRK refugees. The most important route to South Korea was DPRK-China-Thailand, often via, but not directly from Vietnam. Following the 2004 airlift incident, Vietnam was essentially closed, he said. In 2006, the ROKG resettled over 2,000 North Koreans, with most coming from Thailand, but only a couple of hundred from Cambodia. Lately, even Thailand was dragging its feet and cracking down on ROK shelters that had been allowed to operate by mutual consent. While there were standard-operating procedures in Thailand, cases in Cambodia were handled "unofficially," meaning case-by-case with the GOC Prime Minister's office.

¶12. (C) Yu continued that from time to time, the ROKG also helped North Koreans in Burma, by putting them on a plane for Bangkok and processing them through UNHCR there. In one incident, a family of four, allegedly, once in Bangkok asked for USG resettlement, but when denied, they changed their mind and again sought ROKG resettlement. Yu said that each case of North Korean refugees was complicated for different reasons.

VERSHBOW